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ARRIGO BOITO

By FAUSTO TORREFRANCA

BOITO the musician has given us the opera *Mefistofele* and certain less important things which cannot easily be found, even in the libraries, and, as far as is known, are of little value. But *Mefistofele*, though somewhat remote from our present-day standards, is not yet far enough removed in time for us to be able to estimate it justly.

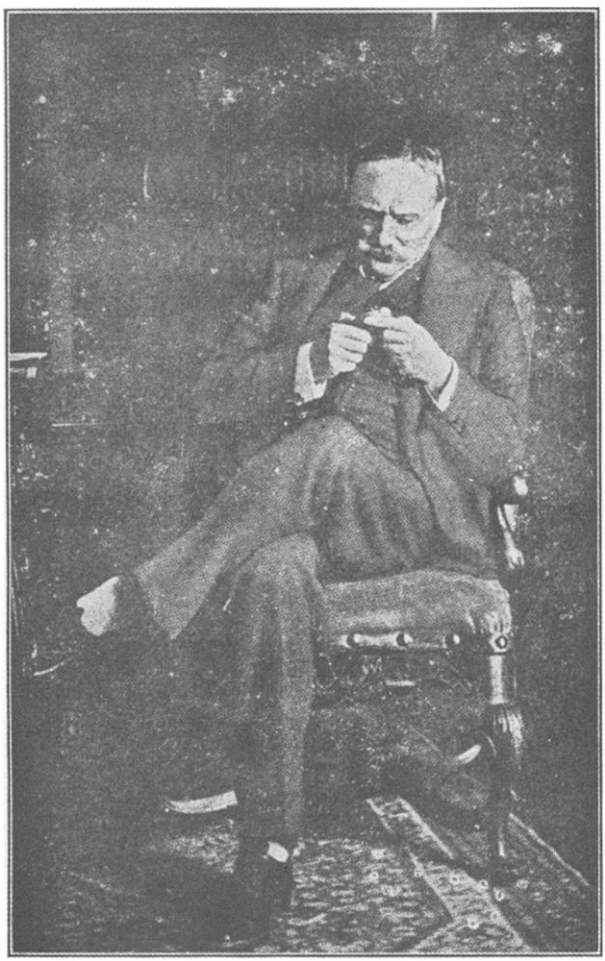
Its historical importance is now altogether discounted, and, to me at least, it seems that there could not be a Boitian musician, and almost as if such a one had no right to be. As for its esthetic importance, that is still noteworthy in that it can serve to demonstrate how little Boito belonged with the Romantic school.

Let us search into the dynamics of this work of art, since that is always the essential thing in music. We soon discover that *Mefistofele* very rarely presents those daring breaks in rhythm, those sharp modulations, scorning all rules, those liberties in vocal phrasing, that contest—now open and victorious, now restrained and impatient—of the melody with the closed forms of the aria and the song, which are characteristic of the Romantic period, or even of the time of the Italian preromanticists—clavier-players and violinists—of the early 17th century.

The best things of *Mefistofele* were written in closed form, undoubtedly, and these proved to be the most popular. On the other hand, so crudely is the cycle of the finished melody broken up in many places, that they seem to evidence obstinacy of will rather than the passion of fancy.

No, as a musician, Boito was decidedly not a romanticist.

Of the romantic I see little more than certain merely external signs (abuse of chromatic scales and of transitory modulations) which indicate dissatisfaction and experimental research, and are the more remarkable because Boito was essentially a lyricist and never succeeded in giving expression to his discontent and his passion for research in the most natural way, through the symphony. Of the truly romantic there is nothing but his love for popular melodies, which is sufficiently proved by the dances, especially the ballo polacco (Obertas) of the first act, and by certain parts in which are felt the rhythm of the polacca (*Fin da*



Arrigo Boito

stanotte, nel orgie ghiotte, etc.). Here, however, we find another link in Boito's chain, his love for Chopin and, we say it more boldly, his predilection for Polish music. That he had inherited this from his mother, the Countess Radolinska, there can be no doubt, but so many inheritances, even those wholly spiritual, are dissipated, that it would be unintelligent to insist upon one which, by chance, bore fruit.

No one can deny that passages like "Ave Signor dei angeli e dei santi" (after the first series of perfect consonances) or the legato bass of *Siam nimbi volanti* (third movement of the Prologue) and the *Meno teneramente* which follows the "Salve Regina,"[1] especially where it recurs with the bass taken by the organ, have the coloring and even the harmonic arrangement of Chopin. We would say that they were important extracts from unknown works of the Polish musician, if we did not recall too clearly the religious and choral parts of the nocturnes and several preludes. That these resemblances have not hitherto been noted is of little import. Certainly, in my opinion, these traces of Polish tendencies are of much more importance than the resemblances to Beethoven which, because they are more evident, have been generally remarked (as in *Dai campi, dai prati* and *Forma ideal, purissima*, not to mention other movements suggesting extracts from the *Sonatas* and also the *Scherzo* of Opus 28).

We see in Boito an appreciative connoisseur of music, who knows his Chopin and his Beethoven so thoroughly and is so penetrated by their influence as to feel his creative powers exalted by and polarized toward their music. And it is evident that this love of his is a true one, in the sense that it is not ambitious and vainglorious, but fervent and devoted. It is full of ardent ingenuousness and, as it were, of primitiveness. But through these limpid waters we see rising before us the solid foundation of his tenacious passion, the ambition to give to the opera a content not merely national, but universal. And this ambition shows us the composer of *Mefistofele* in his true historical importance, which is the one thing that survives and is not altered by the passage of time.

Seen in this aspect, Boito appears to us, in as far as he is a musician, not as a romanticist, but as a humanist of romanticism; an artist who studies and assimilates the romanticists in the spirit in which the humanists studied and assimilated the Hellenic authors. He is a romanticist touched with classicism, and, as such, necessarily two-sided and in a certain sense indefinable. He is a

[1]Page 20 of the edition for pianoforte.

martyr to expression, clear, balanced and finished, and the long mental anguish he suffered while composing *Nerone* (an opera which has not yet been published) was, in my opinion, in the nature of a martyrdom. Nor should we forget his long endurance during the composition and revision of *Mefistofele*, that *Mefistofele* which, not content with the four pseudo-symphonic movements into which the Prologue is divided, he adapted in all its first part to the classical symphonic form, as *Allegro* (La Domenica di Pasqua), *Andante* (Il Giardino), *Scherzo* (La Notte del Sabba) and *Finale* (Morte di Margherita). So symphonic indeed, that this last, like every good and genuine *Finale*, is a résumé of the most significant moments of the other three. This is sufficient to prove that Boito, at the same time that he is undergoing martyrdom in the cause of melodic beauty, suffers also—and herein lies a real and grave antithesis—from a nostalgia for the symphony. In this way, and not from the Wagnerian visual angle, are to be interpreted the recurrences of the leading motives abounds.

Boito's tendencies are revealed even more clearly in that most important transformation seen in the second edition of his *Mefistofele*, the recalling, nay more, the repetition, in the Epilogue of the greater part of the music of the Prologue. Symmetry and Balance; is any other proof needed to convince us that this musician was troubled with the malady of classicism?

Would it be fitting to suggest here to the reader, now shown the way, that the Garden act is supported, so to speak, by a single motive which runs all through it, and that the melody which springs softly from this motive, preludes the long scene and closes it? Need we recall to him that an analagous construction serves as a musical support for the *Notte del Sabba classico?*

These critical premises established, we ask ourselves, thus anticipating the reader's question: what tendencies of Boito's will appear in *Nerone* and be fully confirmed by it?

It is evident that we cannot answer this without delaying a little in investigations based, necessarily, upon very vague hypotheses. For never did a critic find himself facing a problem of such difficulty.

Boito's is a unique case in the history of all the arts, for although he lived to be over seventy, we know of his productions only two of the early works, *Mefistofele* and a book of verse, and we are in almost entire ignorance as to the opera (*Nerone*) which will sum him up for us and define him historically. Thus he presents himself to the critic as a youthful author who lived to old age, and also as an author advanced in years who died with his

work still unpublished; and, so regarded, he is still as two-sided as a hermes, be it said without any intention of disrespect.

It is true that we know also the tragedy *Nerone* in five acts, which Boito consented to publish in 1901; but the author himself left a written statement, in the form of an "Avvertenza," that "the book does not conform entirely to what is intended for lyrical representation" and that "much detailed matter has been added to the dialogue and in the didactic parts." We may disregard the additional details in the didactic parts, merely observing that the execution of these by the various characters, or, if it is a question of entire scenes, the expression of these in the music or even in the simple expressive coloring on the part of the orchestra, would necessarily replace a not inconsiderable portion of the musical discourse. But the measure of additional detail in the dialogue cannot be estimated, even approximately, nor can we imagine the actual length of the libretto of *Nerone*, given the poet's ability in cutting out or shortening entire scenes.

The results of this ability are evident to one who has the patience to compare the texts of the first (1868) and the second (1875) librettos of *Mefistofele*, where "La Domenica di Pasqua" (act one) and "La Notte del Sabba" (second part of act two) present excellent examples. The first episode was reduced by a good third, the second was diminished by about half, and yet both appear to us as the most spontaneous and dashing pictures of imagination in the entire opera. Even more interesting is the reconstruction of the final episode, or epilogue, "La Morte di Faust." Here, little less than half of the verses were suppressed, the opening scene with the four spirits disappeared, and Faust's long monologues were dramatically resolved into an alternation between the memories and aspirations of the aged dreamer and the temptations of the ever youthful demon. Mefistofele's part, limited in the first redaction to two verses at the time of his entrance after Faust's monologue, and to ten verses of satanic exultation and of tragi-comic anguish while Faust is dying, is now extended through the entire Epilogue; in this way the figure of the tempter opens and closes the episode and, as it were, dominates it, the greater part of the additions, equal in length to what was taken from Faust, having been written for him. If the entire Epilogue is longer than that of the *First Mefistofele*, this is owing to the desire of the poet-musician to recall here the music of the opera and of the "Prologue in heaven."

It would be, then, merely rash imprudence for the critic to attempt to deduce from the book of *Nerone* more than the general

outline of the libretto. "Libretto" is the diminutive of "libro," book, but no one can say to what extent it will become that when it falls into the hands of an artist like Boito. It would undoubtedly be difficult to sustain the hypothesis that the alterations have been slight or negligible. I believe, for example, that the first act (in the Roman Campagna) must have been abbreviated by a good half, calculating roughly. The experience of the poet with the two *Mefistofeles*, and the almost unanimous voice of the critics who, in his own time, expressed well-justified doubts as to the adaptability of so much literary and erudite detail for the stage or for a musical setting, cannot have remained without effect upon the work of the poet-musician.

My conviction is definite and, I dare to say it, assured, that when Boito published his tragedy, the music also was fully completed and the score perfect in all its parts. In publishing the literary work, more than twenty years after he had dedicated himself to this subject, his intention was merely to test the public, through the voice of criticism, as to its judgment and preferences. For he had too much respect for the genius, at once artistic and practical, of his eminent friend Giuseppe Verdi, not to accept his opinion that in theatrical matters "the public is always right." (And even casual criticism is right, I think; at least when it confines itself to common-sense observations relating merely to "weights and measures.")

Having obtained this judgment upon the purely theatrical side of his *Nerone*, I have no doubt that Boito set to work again to revise, to enliven here and there, and above all to shorten the scenes already written, interesting no doubt, but with a tendency toward oratory and monologue which was the principal defect of the first *Mefistofele* and also the defect of Boito as poet, for we encounter it even in the lyrics of his book of verse.[1] In fine, I am certain that Boito wrote a first *Nerone*, different in style, but not different in its defects or in its fundamental worth, from the first *Mefistofele;* and that in almost twenty years of new labors or, at least, of most painstaking self-criticism, and of musical effort assuredly not less difficult, the master has given us a second *Nerone*, comparable to the second *Mefistofele* in this respect: that the merits of the first remain intact in the second and that the defects have been greatly diminished. It is true that in order to be sure of this it will be necessary first to assure ourselves that the libretto of the second *Mefistofele* is superior to that of the first, but I am precisely of this opinion,

[1]A. Boito. Il Libro dei Versi—Re Orso. Turin, 1877.

notwithstanding memories and regrets periodically renewed by the criticism evoked by every reference to the first score, which was destroyed by the master. A careful comparison of the two librettos shows that all those parts so appropriately lyric in the first were retained in the second, and that others were added (in the "Morte di Margherita," for instance), while the discursive, oratorical and philosophical parts were shortened; and one need only think of the heaviness of such parts in Wagner's musical dramas to comprehend how greatly pruning of this kind relieves and lightens a work of art.

We recognize the fact that we lost a long piece, and doubtless an interesting one, of descriptive music, "La Battaglia," the symphonic intermezzo which preceded the Epilogue, describing the clash of the Catholic armies of the Emperor with those of the anti-imperialists. But, even admitting that this intermezzo was a masterpiece, it cannot escape the most modest critical acumen that its arrangement, toward the end of a drama, was such as to destroy whatever it had of lyric beauty. The symphonic poem became a crashing discord when launched with great force from between two episodes full of sweetness (too full, indeed), of intimate feeling and of keen expectancy, the "Sabba classico" and the "Morte di Faust."

In conclusion, there is no doubt that also the best of the music of the first *Mefistofele* was preserved in the second; all that was most fluid, most tranquil and richest in the vocal parts was preferred to that which was less spontaneous or more involved. Moreover, two lyrics (*Lontano, lontano,* and *Spunta l'Aurora pallida*), the most delicate and most plastic in the entire opera, were added to animate the episode of the death of Margherita, the first of which syllabic, alliterative, classically scanned, came, as is known, from the music of *Ero e Leandro,* most of which was destroyed by the composer.

The long vigil of Boito's art, from the first *Mefistofele* to the second *Nerone,* appears to us, then, as a slow process of decantation. Little by little the heavier elements of his fancy are deposited as inert sediment, and that which is fluid or which, because of its lightness, can be held in suspension, remains, in little less than the state of absolute purity of a solution which has passed through a filter. Which process also is classical and not romantic in its nature.

And, for the rest, Boito the musician was so little of a romantic as to end by becoming greatly enamored of the freshness and strong healthfulness, like that of a countryman, of Giuseppe

Verdi; of that Verdi whom all musicians of the Romantic school could not endure. Thus Berlioz, Wagner, Bizet, and, as has been said, Boito himself; while Franco Faccio, Marco Praga and others would make Verdi perforce a romanticist in music.

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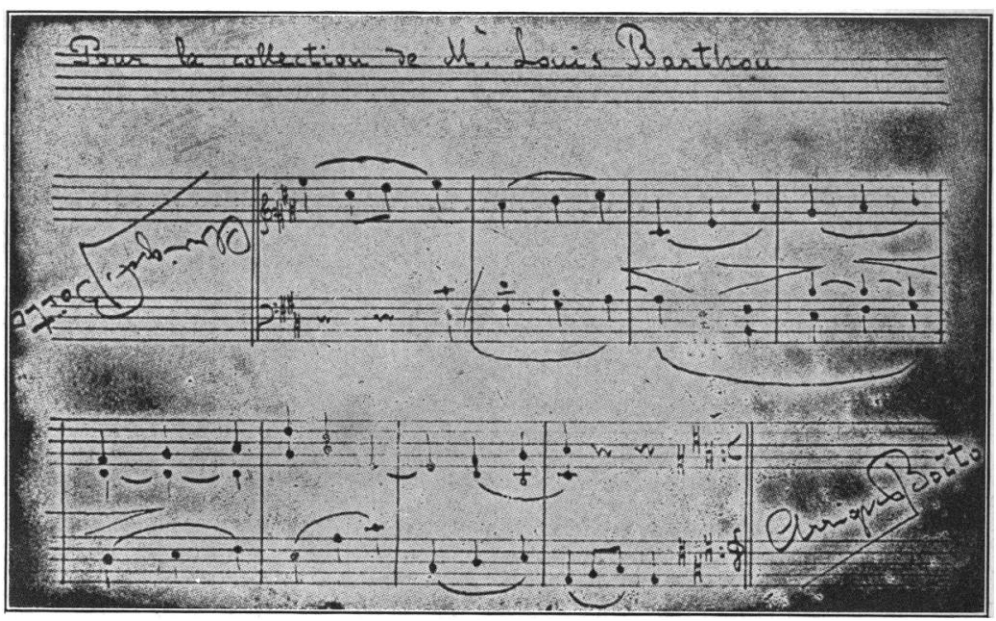
Every time that I think, whether as historian or as critic, of Arrigo Boito, his friendship for Giuseppe Verdi, his "devoted voluntary servitude" as he loved to call it, appears to me as the fundamental problem of his art and of his life, both so singular. Singular, indeed; but before speaking of this "servitude" it will be well to make some preliminary observations.

It is not strange, for example, that this artist should have disappeared from amongst us before having passed the great turn marked out by God in the pathway of our history; disappeared, as perhaps will be said one day, after having seen, with a clear and agonizing consciousness of grief, all the tumultuous heaping up of audacities and unbridled license, all the slow settling of the dregs of research and science, which were the principal characteristics of the European art of the last forty years. And perhaps one day it will also be said that in this art there was something like a mutely imploring presentiment of the world-wide catastrophe which appeared to burst forth unprepared. Did Boito feel all this? Assuredly he felt it; with that depth of sentiment and lack of power of logical clarification which is peculiar to the artist.

He who believes, as many do believe, that we die only after having lived through all the things and all the events for which we were destined, or when our knowledge of the moral experience of the world is complete and perfected, in the evil through their good activities, in the good through their evil activities, finds it natural that Boito should have died at the opening of a new epoch. A man fundamentally good, with an actively inquiring mind, it was decreed by fate that he should die when he had attained to full knowledge of the evil of our former life, that life which also died in the presence of the new one which has arisen from the war. This new life is all filled with anxieties and not, like the old, with leisurely and agreeable study, and the boy of seventy must have become a man of thirty to be able to take his part in it. Moreover, Boito's attitude was always that of one who stands at the open door of life and gazes in, either smilingly or pensively, without the desire or the power to enter.


Pour la collection de M. Louis Barthou

Arrigo Boito stopped at the portals to which life had beckoned him, including that great one of the future, opened wide at one blow before the minds of all. But only the minds of the vagabond and the mendicant were unknown to him, the lordly traveller, the aristocrat in the world of poetry.

He was in turn, curious and proud, daring and timid, passionate and indifferent, and all these characteristics, now the one, now the other, kept him from "crossing the threshold." Even when serving as librettist for Giuseppe Verdi we see him with the mind's eye, in the attitude of one who stands aside and listens, with "the knees of the mind bent" and keeping himself partly concealed because his heart is so filled with great emotion.

With *Mefistofele* (1868) he had arrived, a youth in years, upon the threshold of a new art, charged with the vernal impulse, in a Europe—consider this well—which had not yet heard Verdi's *Aïda* (1871) or Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* (1869-1876). But here he remained, we do not know whether with the smile of the sceptic in which the will is lost, or with the serene confidence of the strong man, who sometimes does nothing because he fears that the world is still too limited for his great abundance. Boito was not enough of a romanticist to abandon the bridle when riding his Pegasus.

That he has been universally considered as belonging to the Romantic school is continually more of a marvel to me. As a poet he arrived, with his analytical experiments in sound and metre, at the border across which we pass from poetry to a mere game of rhythm[1]; but he never ventured nor did he wish to set to music any of the lyrics of his *Libro dei Versi* or of the dazzling conceptions of *Re Orso*, although they would have lent themselves with the greatest ease to such treatment. And, on the other hand, dual also in this, he trained himself in classical reconstructions, attempting at the very first Carducci's barbaric metre ("Circonfusa di sol il magico volto"). As a poet, his desire was to be rather the librettist, or, in a certain sense, the dilettante; and so he prepared, not only for Verdi, but also for other musicians, mediocre and petty, pictures, dramatic scenes, and verses, which he himself could have animated with sound and sent forth on the wings of song.

[1]That is, not poetry adapted for music, as it is commonly called, but a metrical absurdity which is neither poetry nor music. It would correspond at the best, to certain popular dances which have no theme, but in which a formula of accompaniment is promoted to the dignity of a theme. The time dominates and *there is no other rhythm;* therefore true rhythm is lacking.

Here also he stopped upon the threshold; more absorbed in the art of others than in his own. (In a certain sense a modern Arcadian; but not a romanticist.) But Boito the librettist did not become the servant of the composers for whom he wrote; he honored himself by a single true servitude, that voluntary one which he offered to Verdi. He wrote for his own pleasure and *for the music which he himself would have wished to compose* had his ability been of that kind; and meanwhile he was not composing, or if he composed, he either did not write down his compositions or else destroyed, wholly or in part, what he had written, as in the case of *Ero e Leandro*. (A dilettante in this, like those of the 17th century, but not a romanticist.)

As a librettist, Boito prearranged and prepared experiments for the musician slumbering within himself rather than for the musician in those whom he aided with his art as writer of verses and dramatist. Indeed, he so forgot his dignity as a poet, as to prepare a scenario brilliant with vulgar reds, brazen greens and gaudy yellows, suited to the ebullient and somewhat coarse imagination of Ponchielli. He wrote *La Gioconda* (1876) with an ability full of finesse and subtlety which sometimes drew him on to inflate his style beyond all bounds of good taste, he, the incomparable, the virtuoso!

The duet of the two women in the second act offers a typical example of this kind of disfigurement. No one who knows Boito well will ever believe that he wrote with the genuine passion of a man and a poet the words which La Gioconda has the courage to address to her rival, Laura:

Ed io l'amo siccome il leone
Ama il sangue, ed il turbine il vol
E la folgor le vette, e l'alcione
Le voragini, e l'aquila il sol.

(And I love him even as the lion
Loves blood, and the whirlwind its flight,
The lightning the mountain-tops, the sea-bird
The mounting waves, and the eagle the sun.)

Boito never wrote mere rhetoric in his life, and yet this is the most daring rhetoric, which the technical correctness exaggerates by a point instead of weakening.

The nobleman Alvise, who imposes suicide upon his wife, Laura, during a great fête, dosing her with terror in aristocratic measure—for he is an apothecary of jealousy and assassination—is so truculent that he borders on the ridiculous, and so excessively

the "grand signor" in his cruelty, that we see him shrink before us into the form of a mere marionette. But for Ponchielli, who was never able to forget entirely that he had been a bandmaster, these canvases with their fire and brimstone were what God creates to whip the imagination and to draw it on to the most violent musical extremes. And it is evident that Boito enjoyed making these canvases. He was like the cat that plays with a mouse, and procured from it the most musical diversion that there is for the mind of an intelligent listener, the game of foreseeing, the ability to imagine the succession of the various movements of a composition, which seems, but is not, capricious. A pleasure of this kind becomes the more intense the more often the anticipations are verified. It is that which we all feel upon hearing a new composition, the greater if this is written in a style with which we are familiar.

Suppose that a symphony or concerto of Mozart's time were brought from its retirement and again presented in public. Acquaintance with the style would suggest continually to the hearers, developments, variations, cadences, recurrence of themes and of entire periods, which would be verified for the most part; and the pleasure produced by this coincidence would constitute three parts out of four of the enjoyment they would feel upon hearing that music notwithstanding the fact that it was so remote from them in construction and sentiment. In this way they would make for themselves exercises in style, almost like those of a student in a conservatory. And Boito's were exercises in style; he trained himself and acquired freedom of style and made keen his perceptions, by studying the style of others, partly from that thirst for experiment which tormented him all his life, partly through that sort of intelligent disoccupation of the aristocrat of art which made him, apparently at least, a slow and listless composer, which made him always hold aloof from his own work, viewing it like an outsider. (A romanticist in this, but always a voluntary martyr to finished, classical expression.)

Another example of his experiments is found in the oriental eclogue *Falce* (1875), in reality a species of vast symphonic poem, into which is introduced a long scene, tragic at first, then idyllic. The prologue describes the battle of Bedr, between Mahometans and idolators (in the eleventh year of the hegira), and its finale, in the form of a duet, is based upon a dirge which is given out by a caravan moving off into the distance. The scene is most simply and exquisitely symbolical. Zohra, an Arabian girl, laments the slaughter of her relatives in battle, and invokes death for herself

also. Seid, a mower, who appears to her, is believed by her to be Azraël, the angel of the last hour. But life triumphs and binds in the bonds of love the youth and maiden, who follow from a distance, intoxicated with bliss, the caravan going toward the desert. The picture, aflame with color and rich in warm tones, but as if clouded by an atmosphere of unreality (through too much light), is a truly delicious mirage in the desert of poetry adapted for music existing at that period.

And it was such as to fascinate one of the composers of that time, the one most ardent and at the same time most gentle in fancy, the most dreamy, and the most single in purpose, Catalani, the author of *Loreley* and *La Wally*. And it was especially for Catalani that Boito wrote, with that sure intuition of the mind of others which we see, always better, to have been his chief quality. By writing for others he whetted in himself that rarest gift of critic and artist, and acquired an intimate acquaintance with every style; intimate to the degree in which it remained in a form potential and unlimited. This experience enabled him to understand, as a critic, what were the most effective qualities of an opera composer, and, as an artist, to write the libretto best adapted for that composer. And through this gentleman's apprenticeship, during which it was not made clear whether Boito was artist or dilettante, he prepared himself (unwittingly?) to serve Giuseppe Verdi, by composing for him the poem of *Otello* and, above all, that of the delicious *Falstaff*.

And for one desirous of standing aside to consider what it is that so mysteriously seizes and arouses the imagination of others, there could be no more unusual experience than that of watching the great Verdi at work.

But *Otello* dates from the year 1885, and Boito knew Verdi in 1863; before the composition of *Mefistofele*.

What occurred between him and Verdi during these twenty years of friendship, not continuous certainly, but years which their very disagreements rendered gradually more intimate? The respectful silence preserved by Boito in gentlemanly fashion, leaves us only hypotheses here.

We know nothing more definite, indeed, than that Verdi appears to have charged him, in 1863 or about that time, with the revision of the libretto of *Simon Boccanegra*. Giuseppe Verdi thought highly of the music of this opera, notably unfortunate in the dramatic and literary structure of its libretto. But this revision, which the master had planned from the time of the first performances in 1858, was not completed until 1881. Now, if we

do not yet know what these years contained for Boito, aside from the close pruning of his *Mefistofele,* we do know, meanwhile, what the years from 1853 (*Traviata*) to 1871 (*Aïda*) brought in the life of Giuseppe Verdi. In a sketch published for the Verdi centenary[1], I believe that I was successful in calling this period to the attention of artists and critics, who had all passed it over as negligible, adducing *Don Carlos* as proof.

I said at that time that undoubtedly these twenty years or thereabout of artistic activity, vague, painful, and almost without result, were marked by sad and wearying inward conflict, which, if inconsistent with the image which we had made for ourselves of the Bussetanian as of a countryman, sane and serene, outwardly somewhat hard and obstinate, but in reality keen and genial, is yet in perfect consonance with what we know of Verdi's true character. Note that I added that these same years, from 1853 to 1871, represent an epoch of slow cultural awakening, also for musical Italy.

Not by chance did Verdi the opera-writer become, at the end of these years, composer of a quartette, even if merely for his own pleasure. (And further on:) In those years . . . . fall the most eclectic of Verdi's works (*Les Vêpres siciliennes, La Forza del Destino, Don Carlos, Simon Boccanegra, Un Ballo in Maschera*). . . . The mental crises which he suffered, manifested themselves also, and in a manner quite as significant, in the reconstruction of works antecedent or belonging to that same period of time. A musical composition does not issue from the mind all complete, and it remains always inferior in many respects to the aspirations of the composer. Hence we see the St. Petersburg edition (1862) of the *Forza del Destino* replaced by that other prepared for "La Scala" of Milan (1869) and Verdi planning repeatedly the revision of *Boccanegra* (1857), although this was not completed until 1881 . . . . *Lo Stiffelio* (1850) became *Aroldo* (1857), *Macbeth* (1847) "was recast in 1865," and even the *Battaglia di Legnano* (1849) appeared to the author, momentarily, as worthy of further attention, in his strong and persistent desire of reviewing and so to speak, inquisitioning, more even than of perfecting, the work of his own artistic past (Letter of September 19, 1857).

Add here that *Traviata* itself, despite its youthful richness in poetic fire, suffered alterations in five of its numbers (after its unsuccessful production at Venice in 1853), and therefore has good right to be considered as the work which opens this long period of artistic crisis, or, at least, as that which bears the first undeniable indications of it, though these are concealed by its somewhat brutal exuberance of fancy . . . . Consider that about this time occurs the only project for an opera which Verdi had cherished for a long time but had never carried into effect, apparently for practical reasons, actually, I have no doubt, because of

[1]In *Rassegna contemporanea,* Nov. 10, 1913. Verdi contra Verdi (notes for an exposition of the art of Verdi).

the impossibility of concentrating upon a great inspiration, capable of giving effect to the new ambitions which were stirring obscurely in his mind. I allude to *Re Lear*, of which the composer had thought vaguely even as far back as 1848 or 1849 . . . . and of which he speaks in a letter of the 28th of February, 1850, to the librettist Cammarrano, and in another, of the date of January 4th, 1855, addressed to Somma.

In this sketch I illustrated the various aspects of these twenty years of crisis, concluding as follows:

Only at that date (1870), while composing *Aïda*, was Giuseppe Verdi complete master of his artistic powers. And he was master of himself because, aside from his sudden inspirations, he was possessed of that faculty of keen analysis and that broad perceptive sensibility which are characteristic of the great synthetic artists. Twenty years of spiritual crisis had resulted in the refining of this sensibility and its discipline through experiences which, until that time, had remained almost unknown to him.

Now when I wrote these words, one name was sounding continually in my ears: Boito, Boito, Boito.

Boito had known, in 1863, a Verdi undergoing a sharp spiritual crisis; and Verdi had suddenly committed to him the revision of the libretto of *Boccanegra*.[1] What were the intellectual relations between the two from that time on, we do not know, but we have seen that Boito resolved the crisis, which was such not only for Verdi, but for all Italian opera, completing *Mefistofele* (1865) while Verdi was finishing *Aïda* (1871). The parallel is perfect save in the circumstance that it was necessary for Boito to reconstruct his opera later for it to obtain finally (in 1875) not merely a success, but a triumph so splendid that it cannot be considered inferior to that of *Aïda* (though *Aïda* is a masterpiece which will always remain such, while *Mefistofele* is a beautiful work which we can as yet grasp only in part, and can comprehend, for the other part, only from the historical standpoint).

If we examine the two scores, we remark, even in the diversity of style and of emotive and communicative force, resemblances which put them on a footing of equality and make of them twin products. These are seen in the easy inflection or even breaking up of the melody, always ready to follow the yielding or changing of the verbal rhythm, the poetic use of instrumental coloring, unusual at that time, and a tendency broadly *al fresco* in the ensemble scenes. But, above all, in the desire, common to the

[1]We do not know whether Gallignani was right in making this commission come later, toward 1880, after the production of the second *Mefistofele*, but, in any event, this circumstance would not affect our reasoning.

two operas, to overcome the limitations of a musical conscience strictly national and to attain to a larger one which might justly be called European.

We cannot think of the new Verdi, still *in fieri*, as having a strong influence upon Boito, then at the age of twenty-five. Not because of the apparent absurdity of supposing a continuance of a community of interests and of discussions and exchanges of ideas between a youth at the beginning of his career and a celebrated author past his half-century, although such a thing rarely occurs (the case of Wagner and Nietzsche is typical here in its causes, divested finally of every accessory sentimental motive). But we cannot imagine it in this case because Boito, in his great honesty and his great veneration for Verdi, would have confessed it with pride and tenderness.[1] However, if we would comprehend the Verdi whom we have described in the sketch which has been cited in small part, we cannot renounce the idea that Boito exerted an influence upon him, *were it merely generic*. Certainly the first *Mefistofele* and, in part, also the second, were of service to Verdi in showing what is not permissible in art; for every great artist learns, above all, from his contemporaries, what he should avoid in his own work. Typical of this is what Wagner said of Berlioz, not merely obeying that feeling of arrogance which was not the least of his defects, but deferring instinctively to a truth which his instinct as artist told him in imperious fashion.

But it could not remain without influence upon Verdi's open and vivid imagination, this work so audacious that it surpassed, not only in the elevation and vastness of its poem, but also in the amplitude and sumptuousness of its musical lines, *Don Carlos* itself, that laborious work, filled with beauty, but with a surface banality, which the Bussetanian had produced with little success the year before (1867).

Verdi must have found in the lines something of the grandiose which was neither Meyerbeer, nor Wagner, nor Verdi. Now Giuseppe Verdi was tired, above all, of Giuseppe Verdi, and this daring experiment of a youthful fancy must have spurred him on and encouraged him to discover in himself, little by little, that dazzling splendor and that intimate coloring which are the two extremes of the splendid gamut which spreads across the musical heavens of *Aïda* like an oriental sunset. Only after Boito had awakened him from the Rembrandtian dreams in which the music of *Don Carlos* appears to be immersed did Verdi become a

[1]Instead, as is well known, Boito wrote and proclaimed (in 1863) a somewhat insolent toast to Verdi's art, and manifested sharply, on other occasions his dissent.

great musical scene-painter, worthy of a place by the side of Wagner. But Verdi's letter-book, published in 1913, shows a gap for the years 1858 to 1867, and we do not know what is contained in this part, still a mystery, of the correspondence with his intimates, his editor and his librettists, among whom Boito was perhaps already included, through his revision of *Boccanegra*. And Boito has died without telling us what he alone could have told, and what, on the other hand, he would not have told had he lived on for a hundred years!

It is certain that while Giuseppe Verdi was growing calmer in the serene joy of work, and producing *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893), Arrigo Boito was becoming affected with the very disorder from which his friend had suffered up to the time of *Aïda* and, in lesser degree, for some years afterward. He delayed to watch the magnificent old man at work, but continued meanwhile to experiment.

And it was Verdi himself who offered us that marvellous judgment of him, addressing to him the now famous words: "You, Boito, take the steps of an ant, and leave the footprints of a rhinoceros." Will this prove to be true?

These words, if true, can they guarantee that *Nerone*, coming "with the steps of an ant" more than forty years later, will leave a lasting impression on the musical world, and not only on that of Italy, freeing it at a stroke of all those who, in their own opinion, "take the steps of a rhinoceros," and yet leave only the "traces of an ant"? We do not know, but we would like to believe it. As yet, however, I dare not say that we are warranted in doing so, for the whole problem lies here: was Boito rejuvenated and were his powers renewed, during these forty years of labor, as was the case with the Bussetanian?

Many outward proofs concur to reveal unusual modernity of temperament in Boito. It is certain that no one would have dared to reproach him with what Verdi and his followers were frequently accused of, namely, of being in arrears with regard to the musical standards of the day. An artist so attentive to the minor matters of metre and vocabulary when writing poetry, could not but evince refinement and preciosity in writing music. Of his sensitiveness we have some indication, very slight it is true, but nevertheless illuminating, in the offer which our poet-musician made to Verdi of a "rare harmony" which he had found and experimented with; this offer always afterward caused him remorse, as seeming to imply a lack of respect for the great magician of our musical theatre.

31 marzo 1912

Caro Corrado.

Camillo ti dirà lo stato d'abbrutimento in cui vivo da dodici giorni fra dispacci, lettere, visite, biglietti e allora mi perdonerai di non averti scritto neanche una parola. Gli amici migliori sono trattati peggio degli altri.

Tuo aff.
Arrigo

impedirmi d'assumere, in queste condizioni della mia vista, l'esame dei manoscritti presentati al Concorso.

E il male non accenna ad andarsene; mi colse. Durante un attacco d'influenza due mesi or sono, ha delle soste di qualche ora, senza regola fissa, poi ricomincia. I lucidi intervalli devo utilizzarli per far progredire la mia partitura.

Troverai facilmente chi potrà sostituirmi. Il cielo ti guardi dalla diplopia. È una cosa fatta così:

tuo [illegible] Doito

This proves, if there is need of proof, that the most modern ideas (all intent on vertical combinations of sounds and combinations of chords) were so little foreign to him, that he was led by them to test his work again and again, with a patience truly like that of Leonardo. It is known that, when almost seventy, he set himself again to the study of instrumentation and orchestration, and perhaps even of counterpoint, saying that he was ignorant along musical lines. This was not unlike what composers like Beethoven and Bruckner had done at about the age of forty, and our own Verdi, before and after the composition of *Aïda*.

There is no doubt that Boito's musical sensibilities remained keenly alive until the very end, and that he freed himself of those defects which are more evident in his early work. But will it prove that he acquired others? This is what we do not yet know.

Other proofs of the almost decadent refinement of his sensibilities, if still external ones, are the symptoms which describe and define his nervous constitution. The nervous constitution of an artist bears the same relation to his imagination, I think, as does the physiognomy to the mind. Now the nervous physiognomy of this musical mind is most modern. The exhausting erudite research with which he occupied himself has already been mentioned, and only a nervous temperament would refuse ever to be satisfied in such a pursuit.

It has been remarked that Boito worked with shutters closed and lights burning in broad daylight, and we know by hearsay that he was very irritable, under a surface of most exquisite urbanity, a fact which is proved by his autographs (of which we give a sample). Little known is a fact with which I am acquainted through the courtesy of Corrado Ricci, namely, that Boito suffered at intervals, but not merely for a short time, from diplopia or "seeing double"; a phenomenon which he cleverly reproduced by drawing the two signatures, one above the other, which are seen in this closing part of a letter.[1]

Those artists who can offer as a proof of their genius only the irritability of their temperament, with all the nervous divagations which accompany it, will be forced to recognize that Boito was of their kind, until there is proof to the contrary.

Undoubtedly this excess of "modernity" in a spirit already mature, and the example furnished by the continual rejuvenation

[1]Both of the photographs were autographed by the kind permission of their owner, Corrado Ricci, to whom are extended my cordial thanks.

of his friend, Giuseppe Verdi, were the causes which lengthened so greatly the gestation of *Nerone*.

Did this long gestation prove to be entirely in favor of the work? I would not venture to say that. Because, if I listen to the inward voice which the true critic, like the true artist, must obey, whether it dictate to him things pleasant or painful, interesting or commonplace, fruitful or barren, that voice suggests to me the synthetic judgment which summarizes the analyses already made, namely, that the soul of Boito the musician was not so much that of the artist as that of the scholar, of one who reads in the world about him, and in other minds, rather than in books, but who, for the very reason that he is constantly in an attitude of attention (and all reading is a patient attention) closes his mind to those dazzling revelations vouchsafed only to the artist of impatient or violent nature. For even the heaven of art belongs to the violent, even the God of art suffers violence, and God is so near to the mind of man in no other profane thing as in art.

We can now better comprehend the hidden meaning of the great veneration which Boito felt for Giuseppe Verdi. The patient scholar, always in the attitude of an onlooker, experienced through his friend the great and illuminating joy of penetrating into that heaven of the violent from which he had felt himself shut out; and of entering there in the guise suited to his spirit, that of appreciative spectator, of an experimenter, of the scholar who loses himself in the minds of others, the imagination of others.

Because of his very nature Boito's masterpiece is the most elusive, the most difficult to reduce to any form of notation, and the farthest from all possibility of transmission, of any which has ever been created by an artist; a masterpiece created with the full comprehension and even the prevision of the ecstatic emotions which his verses aroused in the tempestuous lake which was Verdi's heart.

His, however, is more than a masterpiece of art, it is a masterpiece of criticism, dual in meaning, dual-sided, one would almost say a hermaphrodite, like all that we can now recall of what has come from this most singular man. For also as the composer of *Mefistofele* he appears as both artist and critic, and precisely as critic of himself. Not only because of the two editions of *Mefistofele*, the second of which became the finest critical revision of the first, but also by reason of another fact which appears to be always more certain, namely, that *Mefistofele* was like an exercise in the grand

style to prepare himself, with full assurance of success, for the composition of *Nerone*. Of this opera, according to recent disclosures, Boito had thought even as far back as in 1862.

Even if *Nerone* were to prove a delusion—but this we cannot believe—we could still say that, losing Boito, we have lost the only poet-composer of worth in our musical history (isolated and modest examples of the 16th and 17th centuries do not count). And his loss is such, not only for us, but for all the world, because his art, as we have already pointed out, though national in form and spirit, was not merely national in its aspirations. Certainly we find the art of Wagner much more deeply rooted in the sentiments of his own race, and much more strongly bound up with the myth and history of his own Germanic land.

In order to comprehend the difference between these two artists we need not do more than find the point of contact where they were both united and separated. This was the *Faust* of Wolfgang Goethe.

In the presence of *Faust*, Richard Wagner, who was convinced of the impotence of instrumental music to express fully the Schopenhauer "Will," absolute music being defective in "moral force" (as if music without words were a lantern with glass so opaque as to prevent the flame within from shining forth, as to give us no gleam from the arcanum of the world), felt himself inspired to write an *Ouverture*, the only instrumental composition he has left us which is worthy of study. But he did not succeed in finding new inspiration, and the *Ouverture* became nothing more than a premonition of the themes of *Tristan*.

And yet a poem of ideas and of action, like *Faust*, lends itself as does no other to an enfolding in the veil of Maya, a music all interwoven with leading motives—magical symbols of the world—and must have tempted the imagination of a poet-musician in quite another way.

In the presence of that same poem, Arrigo Boito, a youth of scarcely twenty, felt himself stirred, or even more, exalted, to the point of attempting its full dramatic and musical realization, and with a daring scarcely credible had completed his *Mefistofele* at the age of twenty-five.

It may be objected that *Mefistofele*, like all that is a reduction of the epic to the form of the lyric, refines too greatly the poetic material in *Faust;* it may be said that not one drama but two, should have been put into verse and given a musical setting by Boito, if he wished to give a respectful and complete interpretation of the great European poet of the German language. But we

may doubt with strongest reason—what every one can at least glimpse, if not clearly perceive—that such a reduction of the entire poem to two musical dramas could ever be effected.

On the other hand, it is enough merely to compare the dramatic action of *Mefistofele* with that of the *Faust* set to music by Gounod, undoubtedly more restrained and graceful, to have for the opera of the Italian the greatest respect and an admiration even more cordial. The subtlety of genius of the poet Boito was successful in freeing Goethe's poem from all that is involved and superfluous from the dramatic-musical point of view.

E come fu?
Nessun si graffi
La cuticagna;
Rimase il guscio
Della castagna
E Belzebù
Mangiò il marron.[1]

Beelzebub takes for himself the best of the poem, all that is most lyric, most human and least cloudily philosophical. No one could do this better than Beelzebub-Mefistofele. And no one was ever better adapted in mind and in spirit than Boito for this musical dramatic realization of Goethe's *Faust*.

Croce has observed that in all his librettos Boito merely illumines the "crooked, tortured and antithetic vision of life"[2] of the romanticist, and that in the conflict between good and evil constantly evoked by our poet, the *Re Orso* of the poem, the Barnaba of *La Gioconda*, the Ariofarne of *Ero e Leandro*, the little-Shakespearian Iago of *Otello*, and the Simon Mago of *Nerone*, are this same figure of Mephistopheles in our world, assuming different attitudes. But I maintain that it is precisely because this figure appealed most strongly to Boito's poetical imagination that we have *Mefistofele* as it is, all revolving about this personification of the Spirit of Negation.

And yet this should not cause us to wonder. As an artist Boito was a great dilettante, and a dilettante is always daring. Nor by this do I intend to belittle him, I who have such affectionate acquaintance with the greatest dilettanti of our musical history, those of the 17th century. There is no doubt that Boito would have been quite satisfied to be of the company of Alberti, Albinoni, Astorga and Benedetto Marcello; and he must have thought with pleasure of meeting them in the Elysium of art.

[1]A. Boito. Il Libro dei Versi. Turin, 1902 (Re Orso, p. 162).
[2]B. Croce in *La Critica*, anno 11, page 345 et seq.

I say this because his dualism is only the great desire of his spirit seen under another aspect. In him the dilettante is the romanticist, and the artist is the classicist; the romanticist and the dilettante are, by mutual consent, the spirit of denial which creates through rebellion, as portrayed in Mefistofele, Nerone and others; whereas the artist and the classicist are Elena, Faust as transfigured in the Epilogue, Ero, Rubria and Fanuel.

He saw, profoundly, in a Christian transfiguration of the love which is full of the sweet ardor of early times and at the same time endowed with modern refinement, the great problem of all modern art, and particularly of the musical drama. Wagner also saw this (somewhat late) and sought to reach the solution in *Parsifal;* but he saw it in the atmosphere of the myth, and the subject is such that the myth is not a framework sufficient to support it. Boito, superior in this to Wagner, saw this solution in the historical tragedy. He perceived it enriched with a human accent of a purity and an intensity which are foreign to the art of the last forty years, but held respectfully aloof from all attempt to present the character of Christ; in this, again, indisputably superior to the German.

The art of this romantic youth touched with classicism, tended, from the very beginning, toward a "classical Sabbath" of uncertain form and nature, which little by little, if I am not mistaken, must have clarified in his spirit until it became a sort of Christian Nirvana.

We cannot say whether this tendency toward classicism developed until it gained a complete victory, or whether it remained as a great unsatisfied aspiration; but, in either case, Boito's could not but be a modern classicism, different in physiognomy and in its general attitude from those which have succeeded each other in the past, even though identical with them in the desire to realize an Elysium of art upon this earth.

Certainly, an opera which closes, even after most grievous pruning and alterations, with the complete conversion and Christian death of the vestal Rubria, comforted by the apostle Fanuel with a vision of celestial and incorruptible love, could not but aspire to a *Christian* classicism which will see with a sure vision and will be such as the world has never known, except in the work of some of the painters of the first Italian renaissance. Under an appearance of romanticism there was in Boito, without doubt, a sad and obscure mystic fervor, which was little by little, clarified and illumined by faith.

The poet who sang

Sono un caduto cherubo
O un demone che sale
Affaticando l'ale
Verso un lontano ciel

(I am a fallen cherub
Or a demon who ascends
On tiring wing
Toward a distant heaven)

is himself a fallen cherub. The singer of Rubria is a demon (romanticist) who ascends on tiring wing toward a distant heaven. The "dualism" of his twenty years, resolved but in part in the second part of *Mefistofele*, and grown to huge proportions in the pagan-oriental evocations of *Nerone*, has perhaps been resolved completely in the fourth and (for stage production) last act of *Nerone*.

The verses of faith of Rubria and Fanuel are the most beautiful which Boito ever wrote; with a beauty which consists in simplicity and intimate feeling.

Perhaps something of the Christian and mystical spirit of his mother was transmitted to him, and who can say that he did not have some experience or at least a glimpse of that higher Christian life which Toniawski, a godly Pole of modern times, revealed to his contemporaries and through them to the world as the end for which all ought to strive with the triple sacrifice of soul, body and works?

If the world shall take the way which the cataclysm of the world war has opened wide before it, and if *Nerone* shall prove to have maintained its promise, Arrigo Boito, a singer with the primitive Christian spirit, will, perhaps, appear to our sons as a precursor. He will be to them an artist who died, as was his destiny, at the beginning of a new youth of the world and of the spirit.

A youth not pagan, but Christian; a youth for which, perhaps, the designation "classical" would not be fitting, but still less so the term "romantic."

(Translated by Julia Gregory)